When one of Carnatic's GREATEST WAS INSPIRED by British tunes

Muthuswami Dikshitar was known to give ragams a unique quality, say classical singers and historians who are keeping his legacy alive

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Some 200 years ago, musician and composer Muthuswami Dikshitar moved to Manali near Madras following an invitation from a zamindar, Venkatakrishna Mudaliar. It is believed during that stint Muthuswami happened to visit Fort St George where he watched British bands belt out western orchestral music. The tunes, some of which are still part of the repertoire of Irish and Scottish melodies, had a quality about them that fascinated the composer from Tiruvarur near Thanjavur.

Dikshitar drew inspiration from these tunes and went on to compose 33 simple, hummable songs in the Carnatic music format on gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon and called them Nottuswara (note + swaras). In 1905, nearly 70 years after he died, his grandson Subbarama Dikshitar compiled them into a book, Prathamaabhyasa Pustakamu ('first learning book') in Telugu.

"Look at Dikshitar's vision," says musician T M Krishna. "This is what is known as transcending influence, inspiration, and doing what it takes to find one's own voice through it all."

March 24 marks the 249th birth anniversary of Dikshitar, recognised as one of the Trinity of Carnatic music – the other two being, Tyagaraja and Syama Sastri, and in their own ways, the classical music fraternity in Chennai, is, individually and collectively, doing its bit to celebrate his legacy.

Last week, at Ettayapuram, in Tuticorin, at the samadhi of Dikshitar, where it is believed he spent his final days, a few musicians brought together by Guruguhaamrta, a group helmed by Carnatic musician and IT professional G Ravikiran paid homage to Dikshitar through song.

"Singing there is an emotional moment for me but I won't call it just an offering," says Krishna, who, along with wife Sangeetha Sivakumar, also a musician, was part of the annual ritual. "I think of it as a way of centering yourself in the art that you practice; it's about finding that connection with the mastery and artistry of these musical geniuses who continue to live only in sound. Think about it, Dikshitar today

MAN OF MUSIC

- **Muthuswami Dikshitar** was born on March 24, 1776 at Tiruvarur
- **He died** at Ettayapuram on October 21, 1835
- **He is considered** one amongst the Trinity in Carnatic music
- **In addition** to learning to sing, he was also adept at playing the veena
- His repertoire comprises nearly **500 compositions** that are all in Sanskrit and are about gods and goddesses, mostly

MUTHUSWAMI DIKSHITAR

A portrait of Dikshitar as drawn by a court painter at Ettayapuram

ives in the sound that he cre-ted, right?"

A few days later, three young musicians, who are at the helm f the Kural Trust that began st year as an e-magazine on usic, organised the Guru-uha Akhandam at The Artery in Chennai. The 12-hour marathon event allowed 70 musicians, known and little-known, to present popular and rare compositions f Dikshitar, in the 10 minutes ey were allotted. "It was spe-al to revive the old style of ntinuous, back-to-back sing-g format," says V Subashri, a usician and a founding mem-er of Kural.

In another initiative, SSP rchival Project by the Jnanar-ava Trust, Krishna, violinist R Shriramkumar and musician nd musicologist R S Jayalak-hmi, have archived 50 of Dik-

REMEMBERING A LEGEND: (Top) Guruguha Akhandam in Chennai; Ravikiran's Guruguhaamrta is a platform dedicated to Dikshitar

hitar's nearly 500 compositions n the original format that they ere written in referencing the ook Sangitha Sampradaya radarsini published by Sub-rama Dikshitar in 1905.

"The quality of Dikshitar's usic," says Jayalakshmi, "is hat he looked at ragams the ay they are; in their original rmat and, as a result giving em a unique quality.

Documenting these aspects an be useful information for esearchers and music students oday, and can help and shape their musical thought process."

Ravikiran says Dikshitar was like love at first sight for him. "It was a night in 2004 when I heard Dikshitar's Sri Bhargavi Bhadram in ragam Mangalam Kaisiki sung by my guru, T M Krishna," says Ravikiran. "I listened to it on loop nearly 40 times until the wee hours of the morning." Ravikiran's commitment towards discovering Dikshitar culminated in Guruguhaamrta in 2009, a platform dedicated to celebrating Dikshitar.

Born into a Brahmin family, legend has it that Lord Muruga, the deity of the temple of Tirutani in TN, placed a piece of sugar candy in Dikshitar's mouth and commanded him to sing. It is said this marked the beginning of his career in music and also led to Dikshitar using Guruguha as the signature word in all his compositions.

By the time he was 16, Dikshitar was well-versed in singing, veena playing, and the vedas. As an avid traveller, who visited several temple towns, the descriptive quality of Dikshitar's musical compositions are not only subjects of academic learning and discourse but also are detailed and deliberate in their content, allowing insights into each of these kshetras, the presiding deity, temple traditions, local culture and festivities of the region.

"Each of his compositions is like a Wikipedia of that temple," says Ravikiran. This sub-set of Dikshitar's compositions was the inspiration for the mini documentary series, Dikshita Kshetra Darshanam (DKD) that Ravikiran launched in 2022 with historian and storyteller Madhusudhan Kalaichelvan. The idea behind DKD, now launching a second season, is to also allow everyone access to Dikshitar's creations. "We live in a world where it is possible to document these things," Ravikiran says, "And we must."

(The writer is an independent journalist and founder of Aalaap)

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